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# AT THE FRONT: THE END OF A BITTER DAY

BY ARTHUR HUNT CHUTE

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IN the Chateau Park the shells were falling thick as leaves in an autumn forest. The nightfall was bitter and gray. The sunshine with which the day began long since had fled. Fast-moving somber clouds were blotting out the sky, while squalls of wailing wind gave promise of a night of storm.

Along the road that dipped beyond the Chateau Park a line of troops was passing. They marched in single file, with apprehensive step, like hunted deer, moving swiftly at the double, then falling flat upon their faces, while the blast of death went hurtling overhead.

The men wore helmets covered with the same material as the sandbags of the trenches. Their uniforms were in color like the dust of the road. On their shoulders they bore great packs; their rifles were carried at the trail. When they doubled they were oppressed by those toiling burdens.

Ever since noon the troops had been passing over the dip of the road in an endless chain. Sometimes a shell fell athwart that human chain, and one,—two,—three, or more went down. There was a rush of stretcher bearers, and limp figures were removed. But the column did not waver. The broken links were closed and the endless chain moved on. Whatever else might happen, the firing line must be fed, and these marching men could know no pause.

Inside the chateau the thick walls muffled every noise, the sound of the guns seemed far away and the cry of the stricken could not be heard.

When the storm began I was afraid that the chateau would soon be about our heads, but the calm of the Brigadier gave me faith in the invulnerability of the walls. The great, dark, paneled room was wrapped in gloom. The Brigadier

sat in a chair beside the window, the Adjutant sat at a telephone, almost obscured.

As I gazed at the face of the Brigadier that tornado of battle without seemed in another world. His long, lean frame was sunken deep into a chair. In the twilight the detail of features was lost, but a bold, high forehead, a pallid countenance, and eyes as black as night were clearly discerned. The red and gold of his insignia gave a relieving touch of color. Looking at him, sitting there so somber and aloof in the gloom of the chateau, I seemed to be regarding a portrait by Rubens or some old Flemish master.

Outside, the shell-swept dip of the road and the hunted figures reminded one of battle; but in the room with the Brigadier there was the calm of vespers. Once during the early afternoon a shell came crashing through the upper stories of the chateau. I was all a-tremble. But the Brigadier, with whom I was talking at that moment, merely raised his eyebrows, and with cold indifference announced, "That's pretty close, my boy. Go on, my boy, go on. Don't let that interrupt you."

Now and again a sudden ring of the telephone told of a frantic cry from the trenches, or the guns. Often the Adjutant breathed with excitement as he uttered portentous news. Sometimes there was a pause, while the Chief glanced at a map, or pondered dispositions. But his imperturbable calm was unbroken, and always in that quiet, low-spoken voice he gave his answer.

Only once in that long and trying day did I hear his accent change. He was for some time without a message from a certain forward Observing Officer. "What's he there for?" he exclaimed testily, and taking the telephone, he laid down the law in the terms of a soldier.

Many a time thereafter, when I had been far forward in the midst of battle, there came with a steadying peace the picture of that Brigadier. Two weeks later our line was suddenly pierced by the enemy. Consternation reigned in the trenches. During those awful moments of suspense, while I sat in Battalion Headquarters telegraphing to our guns, there flashed before me, in the shadow, the memory of that serene and steadfast face.

My days' confinement in the chateau came by the chance of battle. We were taking over from another battery, and I had been sent forward to acquaint myself with the zone of fire.

In the early morning I had ridden across country for five miles with my groom. At the Right Group Artillery Headquarters I was to receive a guide to direct me through to the guns. The Right Group Headquarters I found situated in a chateau, famous throughout Belgium for its miraculous escape from the shells.

I left my horse in the care of the groom in the stables and entered the room reserved as Headquarters. Before any explanations could be made our calm was broken. The Hun let loose a mine beneath our trenches and even where we were the ground was shaken from the vast reverberation. In a twinkling all the enemy's artillery was in action. Without the slightest warning, we had been plunged from the peace of a springtime morning into the wildest inferno of battle. A message from the battery to which I was going sent me instructions to wait until a barrage which cut off their approach had been lifted. All day I waited, and at night I received instructions to return to the wagon lines to convoy ammunition.

We had had a month of calm, an unheard-of experience in the salient of Ypres. With the succession of uneventful days and the serenity of the springtime, we had almost forgotten that world of war in which we dwelt. Men came out of the trenches and returned again, just as those at home went to their daily tasks. Life took on an almost peaceful round.

Amongst the cavalry and the artillery we had a horse show, and the infantry, while out at rest, indulged in a festive day of sports. At the wagon lines the monotony of life was beginning to pall. I was glad when the Major said to me, "You're for the guns tomorrow."

The foundations of our world of yesterday had seemed as fixed as the hills; today they are insubstantial as the mist. Yesterday I stood at attention while the Major-General of a division passed. Tommies and mere junior officers might come and go, but that resplendent General passing in his luxurious limousine seemed fixed and set. Indeed, had I not said to myself as he passed, "His future is secure." But in the chateau on that bitter evening the Adjutant announced, in tones of awe, "The General of the Division holding our left was killed this morning."

The Brigadier's Headquarters for me was a place of ever-increasing gloom. It had gone ill with us, and every

mischance was echoed back into that chateau, as into a whispering gallery. One's heart grew heavy with ever-increasing news of disaster. At such an hour the imperturbability of the Brigadier shadowed forth his invincible faith. He smiled as I clicked my spurs and saluted to him in parting, and called out, "Good luck to you, my lad," as I left the room.

In the hallway I met the Adjutant. "I envy your old boy his stoic calm," I declared.

"The same here," said the Adjutant. "He is certainly a priceless example to the rest of us chaps."

Leaving the chateau for the noise without was like coming from the deep recesses of a lighthouse into the open of an angry sea. One's first impulse was to dart back again into the cloistral seclusion of the muffled walls. Overhead there was a constant whirr of shells. The Germans had got by aeroplane the exact position of a heavy battery opposite, and around the gun-pits there was an endless rain of bursting shells.

The cordite in one gun-pit was ignited by the detonation of an enemy shell. In a moment the whole gun-pit glowed with fire, and flames forty feet high leaped up into the sky. "Gawd pity the poor blighters in that gun-pit!" some one exclaimed. I felt a pang for those unfortunate gunners, who in a twinkling would be burnt to a crisp.

It was pitch dark now, but the landscape was momentarily alight from the burning cordite. In the glare we beheld that long thin column still moving at the double over the dip of the road. In the lurid light, the crouching darting figures looked more than ever like hunted beasts.

That morning when I arrived, all was sunshine in the courtyard. The morning light was stealing through to the wood behind, and the trees were thrilling to the voices of the springtime. As we cantered in toward the stables, my horse pricked his ears to the voice of a lark. I breathed deeply of the scent of meadow and wildwood, and exulted in the balm of the morning air.

But the close of day was sad because of the changes that had come. The wildwood was inky blackness, a storm swept the forest, through which the louder tempest of the Red Artillery shrieked and screamed.

The courtyard, that morning so spic and span, was now littered with indescribable debris—arms and equipment, bully-beef tins, ration limbers, cartridge-cases, and the in-

evitable backwash of the tide of battle. Here and there great shell-holes gaped. The wounded were lying along the sides of the buildings, and in the carriage-house a First Aid Dressing Station was clogged with patients. Behind the carriage-house lay a row of pathetic figures sewed up in gray blankets.

I found my groom busily engaged in holding my horse down to earth. But my approach quieted him, and he opened his great black eyes appealingly, and rubbed his nose against me, saying plainly, "Do take me out of this wretched place!"

Once in the saddle, our mounts needed no urging. They proceeded to put the greatest possible distance between them and the dreadful chateau where they had suffered nightmares all day long.

The roads were black with troops, moving up for the counter-attack. Voices which I had heard the night before in the *Estaminet* hailed me in passing. Later, when I heard that this one or that one had gone West, I recalled their last salutation.

Now and again I was stopped by the clogging of traffic. At such times those going up were keen for the latest rumors from those going down.

"How much have we lost?" "Are we holding?" "Have we counter-attacked yet?" "Are there many before us?" "Will our crowd be the first to go over the top?" These were the commonest questions.

I paused in one place and bent in my saddle to shake the hand of a brother officer of the old 17th Nova Scotia Highlanders. We had been together at the very start, and felt a camaraderie not known in later units of swifter changing personnel.

I had heard of dread presentiments in France, but never did I encounter a more remarkable case than that of my brother-officer. He had been on the line for nearly two years, and was noted for his *sang-froid*. But that night his hand trembled, and he was ashen pale. He tried to smile at some pleasantry of mine, but his face was overcast by a cloud of sickening apprehension.

"By-bye, old man, my time has come," he said huskily in parting.

"Nonsense," I answered. "They haven't made a bullet that can hit you yet."

But I watched him move off as one who has received his death-warrant. Many a time he had passed unscathed, where it had seemed that scarce a blade of grass could live. I thought of him as one who lived a charmed life. For such a one to lose heart seemed direst tragedy.

Two hours later, in leading his company across a field, his head was blown off his body.

On leaving my pal of the old 17th, I felt overwhelmed by a wave of sadness that had been rising within me all day. This was the end of a bitter, bitter day. How could a man keep up his courage through weeks and months of such calamity?

With brooding sadness, I pulled my horse up at the cross-roads, to let a long column of motor-lorries pass. While I paused thus in moody silence, I heard from up the road the sound of singing. A small squad of men were coming out of the trenches, and, true to convention, they were singing as they came.

"Who are you?" I asked, as they passed, thinking that they were some cyclist company, or fatigue party, that had been up for special duty in the trenches.

"We're the 'Princess Pats'," came the proud reply, and then I heard them launch off again into another song.

I had seen that same regiment, then nearly a thousand strong, pass down the road towards Ypres not less than a week before. I remembered how I was thrilled as I thought of their fighting prowess, and gazed at their Colonel, appearing every inch a soldier, riding his charger at the head of his men. Behind the Colonel came the pipes, playing *Blue Bonnets Over the Border*. After that came the long lines of companies with their full complement of officers. It took fifteen minutes for the entire regiment to pass, going in; but it took less than a minute for that remnant to pass, going out.

All that was left of them went by. They had been cut to pieces often before, but this time they were decimated. The gallant Colonel had been killed while leading his men over the top. All the Company Commanders and other officers had been wounded or killed, and only one boyish-faced subaltern remained, who now marched at the head of the column.

Companies that went in over two hundred strong were now returning with twenty-five. The total strength of the

regiment as it passed was less than seventy. Those seventy had suffered agonies beyond description. They had faced the springing of a giant mine. They had occupied the crater, and they had held on in the face of shell-fire so terrible that it had robbed some of their reason. When the Germans had offered them a truce, and asked them to surrender the crater, they had yelled back, "Surrender be damned! Come and take the crater!"

The Huns had not taken the crater. Reinforcements had arrived, and it was safe. Now, the remnant of the regiment that saved the day were marching back to billets. Their uniforms were torn, and caked with blood and filth. Their faces were haggard. The regiment was shattered, but its spirit was unbroken. While one man remained, the "Princess Pats" remained. With that same blithesome and light-hearted mien the handful went swinging by, joining with lusty voices in an old troop-song:

Steadily and shoulder to shoulder,  
Steadily we'll ride and sing,  
Marching along, steady and strong,  
Like the boys of the Old Brigade.

Down the road I followed them into the darkness, until the sound of the singing grew faint and died away. Then, with light heart restored, I too struck up a song, and cantered down the road. For me the flashing glimpse of that brave remnant had swept all clouds away.

I had seen a star at the end of a bitter day.

ARTHUR HUNT CHUTE.